



Ida B. Wells

“

I am only a mouthpiece through which to tell the story of lynching and I have told it so often that I know it by heart. I do not have to embellish; it makes its own way.

— Crusade for Justice

”

Quick Facts

- * 1862-1931
- * African-American journalist, activist, and cultural critic
- * Author of *Southern Horrors*

Biography

Ida B. Wells, known as the “Crusader for Justice,” was born in Holy Springs, Mississippi on July 16, 1862. Her mother, Elizabeth Warrenton Wells, a cook, and her father, a carpenter, had eight children, Ida being the eldest. Slavery ended the following year when Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

During Wells’ early childhood, the nation underwent Reconstruction, several Constitutional amendments were ratified, all southern states were readmitted into the Union, and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was founded. In 1878, a yellow fever epidemic killed Wells’ parents and her younger brother. Rather than split the family apart, Ida left Rust College to begin a teaching career in order to support her siblings. She moved to Memphis in 1880, where her aunt lived, and began social and political activism. Wells soon plunged into legal battles and a journalism career.

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In 1884, Wells was asked to leave the ladies' car and sit in the colored train car. She refused because that car was filled with smokers. Train officials physically forced her to leave; she retaliated but was pushed off the train at the next train stop and was met by a crowd of applauding whites. She engaged in legal recourse and sued the Chesapeake, Ohio and Southwestern Railroad. Although she won in the local court, the Tennessee Supreme Court reversed the decision. During this ordeal, Wells wrote and published her first journalistic piece in the *Living Way*.

By 1889, Wells became one of the owners of the *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight*. In an editorial two years later, Wells critiqued the all-white Memphis Board of Education which precipitated Wells losing her job. As a full time journalist, Wells wrote in the *New York Age*, *Detroit Plaindealer*, *Indianapolis World*, *Gate City Press*, and *Little Rock Sun* (Diggs 136-137).

The historical significance of 1892 in Wells' life was tremendous. Three of her close friends, Thomas Moss, Calving McDowell, and Wil Stewart were lynched. They were owners of a Negro grocery store; an interracial dispute in front of the store led to the lynching. Wells published "Eight Men Lynched," an editorial, in the *Free Speech* on May 21, 1892 which led to the destruction of the newspaper and her exile from the South. She then began working for the *New York Age* and adjusted to her new life in the North. In her extensive coverage of this lynching episode in Northern and Southern black presses, she not only critiqued the human rights abuses of white Southerners but also their deep fear of Blacks gaining economic independence. Her three friends, successful grocers in their community, were brutally lynched because they were perceived by local whites as an economic threat. Consequently, Wells urged blacks to flee from Memphis because of its intolerable race hatred; her passionate plea created an exodus of thousands of blacks from Memphis.

Ida B. Wells began her public speaking career on October 5, 1892, in New York City, where she spoke to 250 African American women about her experiences dealing with the lynch law. Soon she published "Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases," a pamphlet describing the realities of African Americans in the Reconstruction South. In 1893, Wells did her first speaking tour in England and Scotland. By raising awareness about American human rights violations abroad, politicians in the States became more accountable for these atrocities. Making American lynching an issue of international focus was one of Wells' rhetorical strategies in her campaign to end the discriminatory killing of black men.



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1893 was also the year of the World's Columbian Exposition, celebrating the "discovery" of the Americas. African-Americans were systematically excluded from the planning process as well as the actual festivities. Wells, Douglass, and other activists wrote and distributed a pamphlet, "The Reason Why Colored People are Excluded from the World's Columbian Exposition." In her autobiography, Wells described the pamphlet as a "clear statement of facts concerning the oppression put upon the colored people in this land of the free and the home of the brave" (Wells Crusade, 117).

Meanwhile, the nation of Columbia chose Frederick Douglass to be its American representative. He attracted hundreds of African-Americans to Columbia's display which led to the spontaneous naming of "Negro Day." Wells thought this attempt at inclusion was too late, so she urged Douglass to refuse to participate. Douglass, however, thought that it was better to take a late invitation than to give up the opportunity to be recognized. In 1894, Wells began her second British Isle speaking tour and sent articles to her column, "Ida B. Wells Abroad" in the *Chicago Inter Ocean*. "A Red Record," a pamphlet published in 1895 received extremely controversial reviews. In it, she described the stereotypes of black men as rapists and Southern white women as chaste victims. In addition to her successful writing career, Wells married Ferdinand L. Barnett, an attorney and widower, and they began raising a family in Chicago. They suffered the loss of Frederick Douglass on Feb. 20, 1895. In 1896, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) was founded; Mary Church Terrell served as its first president. Ida Wells-Barnett devoted her energies to raising her children but continued to give speeches across America with a newborn son as her traveling companion.

In 1900, Wells published "Mob Rule in New Orleans," a pamphlet that discusses the lawlessness that pervades that city. By 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was formed, and one of its first priorities was to eliminate lynching in America. It wasn't until 1930 that a white women's organization against lynching was formed. Ida Wells-Barnett died on March 25, 1931. Jacqueline Jones Royster reports that between 1882 and 1931, the NAACP statistics showed that 3,318 African-American women, men, and children were lynched "at the hands of parties unknown." Wells worked her entire life to make the world aware of this American holocaust.



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A pivotal character in the fields of African-American studies, history, journalism, women's studies, and rhetoric, Wells is the subject of much academic scholarship. Karolyn Kohr Campbells has analyzed Wells' use of evidence and argument to persuade her audiences while other scholars have connected Wells' journalistic work to the social climate of the Reconstruction. Numerous theorists have focused on key themes that Wells sought to examine throughout her career, including "debunking the myths of the chaste Southern white lady, the brute black male rapist, and the immoral black female" (Words of Fire, 69). These themes, they suggest, reveal her "insightful analyses of the role of sexual and racial politics in constructions of black womanhood and manhood in the United States." Wells also argues that lynching is directly linked to the whites' maintenance of political and economic power.

Joanne Braxton defines Well's autobiography as an "historical memoir," one in which Wells repeatedly used articles from newspapers of the time to "authenticate" her narrative (100). Wells' astute reading of gender and sexuality in the white South and their intersection with racial politics is also observed by Braxton in the following quote: "Decrying the sexual double standard at the root of America's race war, Wells recognized the issue as one embedded in cultural and sexual stereotypes of black men, as well as conventional (and often false) notions of white womanhood" (101).

In this "Southern racial mythology," black men were scripted as sexually hungry perpetrators while white women were seen as the virginal victim of rape. Wells worked with women's groups throughout the nation as well as abroad to deconstruct this myth: "Never before had a black woman so publicly articulated the roots of the immediate oppression of her people or mounted an international campaign against the horror that oppression implied" (Braxton 106).

In a contribution to *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, Hazel V. Carby analyzes Wells' contribution to black feminist theory. Wells, who saw lynching as both a political and economic practice of repression, critiqued "conventional codes of sexuality and morality" and how race and gender are manipulated by patriarchal structures (334). In *Southern Horrors*, Wells traced the contemporary belief that black men are "rapists" and reminded everyone that during the Civil War, Southern men left their plantations and families in the hands of black men. "Lynching, [Wells] argued, was an institutionalized practice supported and encouraged by established leaders of the community and the press they influenced" (Carby 35).



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Akiko Ochiai, in her reading of *Crusade for Justice*, argues that Wells chose to focus on the historical moment of her life rather than on her domestic and personal life. The more “confessional” scenes, she notes, occur only in the later part of the text. Wells wrote this “testimonial” work was written with a specific audience in mind: “for the young people who have so little of our race’s history recorded that I am for the first time in my life writing about myself” (qtd. in Ochiai 369). Ochiai documents Wells’ frequent use of quotations to legitimize her experience and contrasts this “public” work from her diary, a more intimate portrait of Wells’ life.

Simone Davis examines Wells’ pamphlets and discovers that “Wells-Barnett instructs her readers about the shaping power of printed words ‘[by] collaging a great patchwork of quotations from both the white and the African-American press’ (77). Furthermore, Wells employs convention binary oppositions (civilized vs. savage, law and order vs. anarchy, and modesty vs. lust) to destabilize conservative ideology. For Wells, lynching is not a ‘crime of passion.’ Instead, the lyncher uses the Black body and the Black life as a medium, upon and through which he transmits an economically motivated, political message“ (Davis 83).

Ida Wells-Barnett is still known today as a revered journalist, activist, and cultural critic. She worked with women across class and race and national lines to end lynching in the American South. Wells also articulated the tension between black and white women; racial division was present despite gender solidarity. Her efforts to eliminate institutionalized racial and economic oppression are a precursor to the Civil Rights movement. She also promoted active participation in the political and legal process and equal representation in the media.



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